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Task-Based Reading Activities Using Authentic Materials and Skills

One of the biggest challenges that I, a seasoned English language teacher, have faced in the classroom is how to liven up reading classes. Of course, there are pre-discussions and post-discussions, as well as multiple ways to make accompanying tasks related to comprehension and vocabulary more fun, but reading itself is inherently a quiet and solo task. Furthermore, the standard skills we are trying to build in our students—skimming, scanning, making predictions and inferences, guessing vocabulary meaning from context—require practice, practice, practice. While useful and necessary, such practice can easily come to feel repetitive, redundant, and downright boring.

One solution I came up with while teaching university students in Uzbekistan combines the use of authentic materials, task-based learning, and stations. This article discusses this activity and how it evolved into two separate stages, both of which can easily be adapted for a variety of needs, levels, and age groups.

RATIONALE FOR A TASK-BASED READING ACTIVITY

Importantly, this activity makes use of authentic materials. While there is a plethora of quality teaching texts that focus on reading skills, these materials were created for the purpose of being accessible to learners and are consequently not authentic. This is not to say that such texts are not useful. They serve an important purpose in terms of providing accessible reading material and explicitly teaching reading skills. However, they have their limitations. Introducing authentic materials into the classroom can serve as an extension of or supplement to educational texts. Using materials not specifically designed for learners has numerous benefits, including greater interest (Martinez 2002) and motivation (Buzarna-Tihenea and Nadrag 2018; Guariento and Morley 2001). Moreover, authentic texts provide a necessary challenge, as a "main reason for using authentic materials in the classroom is once outside the '*safe*', controlled language learning environment, the learner will not encounter the artificial language of the classroom but the real world and language how it is really used" (Berardo 2006, 67).

Authentic materials offer a way to scaffold students from classroom reading and related tasks to texts they will encounter and skills they will need to use once they are out of the

The questions that accompany my reading activity are intended to promote top-down processing both by way of the types of questions asked and particularly in the second stage of the activity, by replicating a real-life scenario.

classroom. Authentic materials—including old receipts, tickets, brochures, and notes that are lying around most people's homes or classrooms—are also handy for teaching contexts that may not be well-supplied with teaching materials.

This task-based reading activity also allows students to negotiate on their own terms rather than with a teacher navigating them through each step. This lends itself to a student-centered class with many opportunities for communication. Larsen-Freeman and Anderson (2011, 193) consider task-based teaching to be an "example of the 'strong version' of the communicative approach, where language is acquired through use. In other words, students acquire the language they need when they need it in order to accomplish the task that has been set before them." Such tasks not only promote authentic communication, but also lead to consciousness raising (Ellis 2009). As will be seen below, both stages of this activity support these goals. The first stage involves the more traditional completion of a worksheet, as students search for and discuss answers to the questions, while the second part involves more of a problem-solving strategy. As students are working in pairs, they offer support to one another and negotiate answers. Simultaneously, they are incidentally learning and noticing the features of different types of texts.

As this is a task-based activity, students are encouraged to focus on the meaning and function of language rather than specific forms. This is important because when learners are reading in a non-native language, the skills applied in first-language (L1) reading are often abandoned in second-language (L2) reading. Even proficient readers tend to approach the task in a bottom-up approach as they try to construct meaning in a language other than their own (Koda 1990; Prichard and Atkins 2018). The questions that accompany my reading activity are intended to promote top-down processing both by way of the types of questions asked and particularly in the second stage of the activity, by replicating a real-life scenario. The task of problem solving is intended to encourage students to engage their L1 reading strategies rather than dissecting the text word by word.

This activity is also motivating. Reading, like many skills, is best improved through frequent application of the skill. And as with many other things in life, motivation is a key factor in how often one practices a particular skill. This is also the case with reading, whether in one's first language or a new language (Grabe 1991; Wang and Guthrie 2004). Motivation can be of an extrinsic nature (grades, fear of punishment) or an intrinsic nature (interest, satisfaction, joy) (Brown 1994; Ng and Ng 2015). This activity provides the extrinsic push—after all, it is a class assignment—but also sets up an environment for intrinsic motivation in the form of a fun and interactive activity. Moreover, motivation is fed by success and a sense of capability. Through the use of stations, learners have freedom to make choices, thereby setting themselves up for greater success and a sense of accomplishment. The variety of questions in both activities also allows students at a range of levels to complete all or most of the tasks.

Finally, this activity is based on the use of stations. For my purposes, I am defining a

station as a distinct physical work area within a classroom. The distinction of the work area could be made through physical separation like using individual desks or tables—each being a separate station. Or, if this is not possible, all the stations could be set up on one or two tables, with each station having enough physical space from the next to make it recognizable as separate. Working in stations is somewhat common for students in the West, especially in elementary school. For example, if the students are learning about animals, the teacher might set up stations that each feature one type of animal with an image, some sort of text, and possibly a task. The students move from station to station, learning about the different animals. Think of a museum. The exhibits are set up in distinct areas, and people move around the space to view the exhibits, spending a short time on some and a longer time on others.

The purpose of using stations is that the materials don't move, the students do. This keeps the materials organized, forces the students to move around, and allows them to choose what order to do things in. According to Diller (2003, 2), such stations provide "hands-on learning that engages students," while also promoting autonomy as learners are required to make their own choices. The freedom to make choices increases engagement and motivation; in addition, physically changing locations is a sure way to activate the brain (Jensen 2005; Kuczala 2019). And at a more basic level, workstations offer students a break from the usual routine of sitting at desks, eyes and ears focused on the teacher or the text. Furthermore, as the work is done in teams, there is more opportunity for cooperation and authentic communication as the learners negotiate the task and how best to achieve it.

TASK-BASED READING ACTIVITY

This activity takes place in two separate stages. The first stage entails completing a worksheet and discussing answers to questions, while the second stage engages students in problem-solving tasks.

Stage 1

Procedure

In the class I originally designed this activity for, I had 16 students, so I created nine stations and paired students into eight groups; I had one extra station for purposes of flexibility and timing. I later made an easy adaptation to accommodate larger groups. When demonstrating this activity for a group of 60 teachers, I divided them into large groups and set up 12 stations; the group members took turns going to the stations and reporting back to their larger groups.

For my nine stations, I collected nine varied texts: a travel guide, a novel, a menu, a museum brochure, a map, a newspaper, a grammar book, the instructions from a card game, and an issue of *English Teaching Forum*. I set these out on desks around the classroom and labeled the desks 1 through 9.

I then created a worksheet with eight questions and made a copy for each station (see Table 1 for three examples). (An alternative would be to post a set of questions at each station and have students write down answers in their notebooks, thereby avoiding the need for so many photocopies.) Questions 1 to 6 were the same for all the stations and included general questions regarding the type of text, its purpose, the intended audience, and whether the student would want to read the text. Questions 7 and 8 were detail or inference questions specific to the material.

At the start of class, I paired up students, distributed the worksheets, and gave instructions about the task. Students began at whichever station they wanted to and filled out the corresponding questions about the corresponding text. I set no time limit, and students could visit each station in whatever order they chose. They were encouraged to try to answer all the questions but also given permission to move on or ask for help if they got stuck.

Near the conclusion of class, I asked the students to answer two final questions, identifying the skills used during the task and

Station #1	1. Title:
2. What is it?	3. Is it fiction or nonfiction?
4. Who is the intended audience?	5. Why would someone read this?
6. Would you read this? Why or why not?	
7. On what page can we read about the Aral Sea?	8. The author, Alex Ulko, was the first person to do something. What was it?

Station #2	1. Title:
2. What is it?	3. Is it fiction or nonfiction?
4. Who is the intended audience?	5. Why would someone read this?
6. Would you read this? Why or why not?	
7. On what pages can we read about sports?	8. Fourteen were hurt in an accident on Saturday (pg. 5). What was the cause of the accident?

Station #3	1. Title:
2. What is it?	3. Is it fiction or nonfiction?
4. Who is the intended audience?	5. Why would someone read this?
6. Would you read this? Why or why not?	
7. Who drew the pictures?	8. Who or what is Charlotte?

Table 1. Three worksheet examples for Stage 1

saying whether they enjoyed it. We then had a short class discussion about which materials were most interesting or confusing. I then collected the worksheets to identify common strengths and weaknesses in the class. While those particular students were all pre-service teachers, this task and its accompanying skills are relevant to all general-reading classes.

Stage 2

Procedure

For Stage 2 of the activity, I used the materials from the first stage and supplemented them with similar types of texts (more novels, grammar books, maps, brochures, game rules from websites). I created two substations on opposite sides of the room and filled them with texts loosely grouped together. Each substation had a specific scenario. Scenario #1 involved an English teacher looking to do professional development and self-improvement (as most of my students were future English teachers) and corresponded to a substation stocked with teaching materials and related information. Scenario #2 referred to a woman preparing to travel abroad, so this substation included travel guides, maps, brochures, and the like. I created this scenario based on my students' interest in travel. For both scenarios, irrelevant texts were mixed in with the relevant ones.

For each scenario, I created realistic questions a person in that situation might have. For example, a question for Scenario #1 would be, "Tim wants to become a better grammar teacher. Please suggest a book that will help him to do this. Explain why you suggested this book." Or, "Tim is looking for a fun game to play in class to encourage his students to speak. Suggest a game that will be good for this. Why are you recommending this game?" (See Table 2 for example questions for Scenario #2.) I then cut up the questions and placed them into two envelopes corresponding to the scenario and substation set up with relevant (and irrelevant) materials.

Again, students partnered up and then decided which scenario was more appealing to them (luckily, I got a fairly even split). Those who chose Scenario #1 were asked to take a question from an envelope taped to the wall, go to Substation #1 and find the best materials to answer the question, and write their answers down. Once they were finished, they returned the question to the envelope and took a new question. Those who chose Scenario #2 did the same with the different set of questions in the second envelope, using the materials from Substation #2. This part of the activity served as a relay to keep the students moving and focused only on the task at hand.

The challenge for the students was to first identify the most useful texts to answer the question. For some questions, there were multiple texts with appropriate answers; for others, I had purposely set out unrelated materials intended to act as distractors. Once the most suitable texts had been identified, students had to narrow them down to the best one (as at least two of

Maria **Maria is getting ready to begin a one-month trip. She will travel to Portland (Oregon), Turkey, Uzbekistan, and Kathmandu. She is doing some research to prepare for her trip.**	**1. In Portland, Maria wants to stay in a neighborhood with good food, bookstores, and convenient public transportation. She also prefers to stay in a hostel. What neighborhood do you recommend, and why?**	**2. Maria has only two days to spend in Istanbul, Turkey. She is most interested in seeing mosques, palaces, and bazaars. Should she stay on the European or Asian side of Istanbul? Why? What will she be able to see?**	**3. While in Antalya, Turkey, Maria has one day for an excursion. She is interested in history and nature. Suggest a trip for her. What will she see?**

Table 2. Example questions for Scenario #2

each type of text had been set out). For the example question above regarding Tim and his desire to be a better grammar teacher, there were two grammar books on the table: Betty Azar's *Fundamentals of English Grammar* and Penny Ur's *Grammar Practice Activities*. Either choice was appropriate, as long as the students explained their choice rationally. To wrap up the lesson, students combined into two larger groups corresponding to the two substations and discussed their answers. Then, as a whole class, we discussed questions that had resulted in varied answers, and students justified their choices.

I was fortunate that my students were mostly pre-service English teachers and as an English teacher I had plenty of materials relevant to their interests. For those who do not have such access to authentic materials, printed pages from online resources, photocopies of handouts or quizzes, and even student-generated work could be used. For example, the teacher could set out some paragraphs written by students (with the names removed) for the following question: "Tim wants to use one of his students' paragraphs as a model for a descriptive paragraph. Which one should he use, and why?" A single computer in the classroom or even students' own cell phones can also be used to search or survey specific online sources. One such example could be as follows:

> "Tim needs a discussion activity for his intermediate students. Go to https://americanenglish.state.gov/resources/activate-board-games and find an activity for Tim's class. Why do you think this is a good choice for his class?"

This stage is adaptable to the context of more-general, lower-level, or younger learners. A general task would be to create stations using relevant authentic materials and have students look through them and make recommendations for various people. It might look something like this:

1. You have a friend who likes stories about animals. Which book will you recommend to her/him? Why?

2. Your younger brother wants to learn more about astronomy. Find an article that might be interesting to him. Why did you choose it?

3. Your teacher asked you to choose a news story to share with the class. Go to https://www.voanews.com/ and skim the headlines. Which story will you choose? Why?

The questions can be adapted to suit the materials on hand as well as the level and interest of the learners. If you are using texts printed off the Internet, in most cases it is feasible to use a sample text (the cover page, the table of contents, or a paragraph or two) rather than printing out an entire work.

When I tried my original version, both stages of the activity went over well. When my students walked in the room, they immediately headed to the stations, drawn by the materials on display. In my teaching context, original English materials were rare and often kept in locked cases. My biggest challenge was getting the students to sit down so I could explain the task, and then later getting them to finish up and leave. They wanted more time to look over all the materials, and many asked to borrow items. From their discussion and written comments, I found that they were excited to practice their usual skills on authentic materials and in an authentic way. They were also excited about their ability to successfully interact with real-life texts. I was pleased that they were able to identify the necessary skills and were hungry to apply them.

Interestingly, I also found an even split in terms of which stage of the activity—1 or 2—was preferred. Some liked the survey nature of the first stage because they were able to explore multiple types of texts.

Others preferred the simulation of a real-life problem-solving experience.

FURTHER APPLICATIONS

I used this two-stage activity to introduce the reading segment of our syllabus to the class, allowing them to practice a multitude of skills on various types of texts and genres. The activity also allowed me to do a needs-based analysis of their skills as well as their interests. I used the activity as a guide to determine the course for subsequent classes; however, there are additional teaching applications, including the following:

Beginner Reading Class

Being able to identify the type of text (book, newspaper, magazine, etc.), genre, title, and author are key skills we can begin teaching even before our learners become adept readers. A simplified version of Stage 1 asks students to identify the most basic components of a text.

1. What is it? (It might be a book, newspaper, email, etc.)
2. What is the title?
3. Who wrote it?
4. When was it written?
5. Do you want to read this? Why or why not?

If the stations are all composed of books, students could also be asked to identify the number of pages or chapters, whether the text is fiction or nonfiction, and the genre.

Extensive Reading

Another use for this activity is to expose a class to options for extensive reading. Rather than just looking at book covers and half-heartedly skimming the summary, readers would have to take a closer look at their options and make choices about their reading, leading to a greater chance that they will actually read and finish the books they choose.

Introduction to Research Writing

Originally, I got the idea for the reading stations from a workshop I attended about academic writing (Mulder, Spitzer, and Beck 2012). The presenters set out stations of different types of academic texts—journals, books, magazines—and had the participants identify information relevant to a reference page such as author, publishing date, and publisher. It is a great way for students to survey the variety of secondary sources available for research writing and practice locating key information. Additionally, the teacher could make stations using different articles or even sections from articles and ask students to find and cite evidence that supports or contradicts various statements.

Media Literacy

A variation of this activity is useful to employ strategies used in media literacy. This could be done with stations where each device (computer, tablet, mobile phone) is open to a different website, video, or other digital text or—if multiple devices are not available—with paper printouts of articles, advertisements, or images of websites. The tasks could involve identifying sources, perspective, and bias as well as evaluating the trustworthiness of various sources.

Resource Exploration

When the English Department in my university received a donation of a large number of resource books, I conducted a similar activity with the staff. I set up stations of books grouped by topic and created imaginary classes and syllabi situations. The teachers then sorted through the materials to find those most suitable to each situation. As a result, an overwhelming number of resources became familiar and accessible. And of course, during this activity, the teachers identified books that were useful to the actual classes and teaching contexts they were engaged in. Rather than remaining on the shelf or being hoarded by a few, almost all of the books were checked out and used in appropriate classes. This activity could be adapted for any situation where the goal is to make a large cache of resources available for use.

What remains constant is that the strategy encourages learners to explore, make their own choices, and apply critical thinking, all while changing their physical space.

CONCLUSION

This activity illustrates just some of the possibilities for using stations with authentic materials in a task-based lesson. The types of stations, materials, and tasks can be manipulated in a myriad of ways for numerous purposes and skill levels. What remains constant is that the strategy encourages learners to explore, make their own choices, and apply critical thinking, all while changing their physical space. It is a strategy that can be used once in a semester or on a more regular basis. The result will be a reading class that is active, engaging, and effective.

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Finding Heterogeneity in Cultural Homogeneity

A typical complication in teaching for intercultural competence in English as a foreign language (EFL) is the lack of heterogeneity, or diversity, in each class. Universities and schools in many parts of the world are dominated by just one ethnic group. For example, in many of my classes, the students all use the same first language. Therefore, diversity of language use, which is often an indicator of cultural heterogeneity (Guilherme and Dietz 2015), is of minimal use in raising cultural awareness. In addition, I have taught classes where all the students were of the same age and ethnic group, and they all spoke related dialects of the same language. In other classes, only one or two students were not from the local majority ethnic or faith group. I have also come across students who have said their struggle is that they had never spoken to, or intended to speak to, anyone of another ethnicity or faith. The idea of needing to relate to people outside their culture seemed irrelevant to them.

Both Byram and Fleming (1998) in the United Kingdom and Jandt (2016) in the United States have written extensively about the necessary connection between teaching and learning English and developing intercultural communicative competence (ICC). There are various pragmatic reasons to start from the students' own culture(s). Ali and Walker (2014) suggest that materials writers use the "home culture" or students' culture(s) context at lower levels of language learning, transitioning to target-language culture at higher levels.

Bennett (2004, 74) explains that English learners "who have received largely monocultural socialization normally have access only to their own *cultural worldview*, so they are unable to experience the difference between their own perception and that of people who are culturally different." However, there is a lack of teaching materials addressing this inability.

I have designed awareness-raising class activities to give students, in classes that appear to be culturally homogenous, chances to experience differences in perception. These activities serve as a preliminary step in helping students experience and appreciate different cultural behaviors. Following a brief overview of the theoretical framework, the activities are presented below.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Standard textbooks often suggest using cultural differences in the immediate context as a starting point in learning ICC (Liu, Volcic, and Gallois 2019). However,

A curiosity about cultural differences within an apparently culturally homogenous class can help students start to negotiate foreign cultures.

as de Goei (2014), Reimann (2010), and Chlopek (2008) have noted, there may not be much cultural diversity in EFL classes. Without conscious exposure to cultural differences, students in culturally homogenous classes may deny such differences exist (Bennett 2004). This will hinder their ability to interact appropriately with people of different cultures, English-speaking or otherwise.

Some suggestions of ways to help students learn about cultural differences, such as those put forward by Corbett (2010), assume that students are already aware of and interested in these differences. However, in homogenous classes, many students may be almost oblivious to differences in behavior that are related to culture. The following activities help such students become aware of differences in behavior and perception that exist in their own classroom.

ACTIVITIES

Below are five groups of activities I have used when teaching culturally homogenous classes in Indonesia in order to promote awareness of cultural differences. Suggestions are included on how to integrate these activities into any language class to arouse students' curiosity about culture. A curiosity about cultural differences within an apparently culturally homogenous class can help students start to negotiate foreign cultures.

An example of each activity includes comments on how and why to use them. Alternative suggestions are provided for most activities, starting with the ones that I have found most useful. It is possible and even likely that not all of the activities will be appropriate where you teach. I see these activities as a buffet from which you can pick and choose what is appropriate for your students.

Group 1. Focusing on the Everyday

In many Indonesian educational contexts, much emphasis is on Culture with a capital *C*: the dances, foods, and songs of various areas and ethnic groups. This is particularly apparent in school subjects dealing with culture. Such a focus flows over into EFL classes. For example, students tend to ask only about what people in various countries eat, rather than also being interested in discovering where, how, and with whom people eat. They mention what people from other cultures wear, rather than why they wear those types of clothes.

This preoccupation with cultural knowledge as facts has been noted in several other Asian cultures (Tian 2016; Nguyen 2007). Although facts about another culture can be fascinating, knowing them does not directly help a student interact with the people of that culture, one of the stated aims of intercultural competence. This is why culture with a small *c*—the more intangible aspects of culture, including values, beliefs, and practices around language use, communication, and daily life—should rather be the focus. What is needed is the

I see these activities as a buffet from which you can pick and choose what is appropriate for your students.

analysis and then much practice of everyday language and behaviors (Chlopek 2008).

The following everyday culture activities can serve as pre-teaching for the topic or language function they are related to, especially for higher-level classes. Alternatively, the activities can be used at the end of a unit of work to extend cultural understanding.

Activity: Good Morning

Context: Lesson about greetings or the beginning of a new class

Time needed: About 30 minutes

Pre-teach/review: Simple past, reported speech

Procedure: Give instructions and ask questions:

- Think about whom you first talked to this morning.
- Who was it? What did you say? Why?
- In groups of three, discuss your answers.
- *[After small-group discussion]* Are your answers similar or different? In what ways? What have you learned about yourself or your culture from answering and discussing these questions?

These questions are almost guaranteed to produce a variety of answers. One class put forward that an older sibling might start the day by telling a younger sibling to get up and do the morning prayers, but not vice versa. We then discussed this example when the cultural values of hierarchy and egalitarianism were introduced. This variety helps the class start discovering some heterogeneity in their homogeneity.

Personality traits and lifestyle may account for some of the answers, but useful cultural information may well be lurking there. Students living away from home say different things to their roommates than they would say to their parents or brothers and sisters when they are at home. Note that this activity also provides an opportunity to teach the use of titles, names, and terms of address in English.

Alternatives: Any daily speech routine can be analyzed for greetings and leave-takings, factual questions, chitchat, and gossip. Teachers can tweak this activity to have students ask about other daily habits, such as eating, studying, getting dressed, going to school (and going back home), and shopping.

Activity: Combing Your Hair

Context: Contrasting use of simple present and present continuous; utilizing behaviors that are unfamiliar to students, mentioned in a dialog or a reading in a textbook

Time needed: 30 minutes

Pre-teach/review: Simple present for habitual actions and present continuous for present activities; with advanced classes, teachers might introduce *rarely* and other adverbs of frequency

Procedure: Ask questions and elicit answers.

Step 1

Teacher: What am I doing? (*mimes combing hair; elicits answers*)

Students: (*One by one the teacher asks students to mime an activity for the class to guess.*)

Teacher: (*asks students*) What is s/he doing? (*elicits answers*)

Teacher: (*mimes*) I comb my hair every day. Do you often comb your hair? (*elicits answers*)

Teacher: (*asks other students*) Does s/he often comb her/his hair? (*elicits answers*)

Teacher: (*mimes*) I'm combing my hair now. In fact, I comb my hair often/every day. (*asks students to mime and make two sentences like this about themselves*)

Step 2

Give instructions to students: "Find a partner. In pairs, one of you mime an activity. The other will guess what the activity is and then ask how often your partner does the activity. Switch roles and repeat. Later, you will tell the class about your partner, with the first sentence using *now* and the second sentence using *often*, *every day*, *rarely*, or other words to describe how often someone does something."

Step 3

Tell students to write a paragraph about their habit of combing hair. Then have them work in pairs, reading each other's paragraph and discussing what they wrote. Finally, bring students together for a class discussion, comparing habits and thoughts.

Some students tend to describe who and why; others describe when or where. Still others focus on taboos and beliefs. Combing hair in public may or may not be appropriate in the context where you teach; some students might not feel comfortable discussing it. (Depending on their degree of discomfort, you may want to choose a different behavior to discuss.) Using the information students provide about taboos and beliefs in particular, you can create another step for this activity by asking additional questions for discussion.

Step 4

Elicit answers to the following questions:

- Do you assume anything about someone who combs his or her hair in public?
- What do you assume?
- Do you think everyone in the world believes that?

With this activity, you are trying to lead your students to an "aha" moment, where they realize that behaviors they think are normal are not necessarily normal for everyone, and vice versa for behaviors they think are strange.

Alternatives: Other activities include brushing your teeth, eating while walking, feeding a toddler, wearing headphones, studying in the library, and feeding a cat. You can also be more specific about frequency, introducing or using terms such as *twice a day*, *once a week*, and so on.

Activity: Clothes and Makeup

Context: Lesson about clothes and makeup

Time needed: 30 minutes

Pre-teach/review: Vocabulary related to what people wear

Procedure: Show a picture of a person and ask questions:

- What is s/he wearing?
- Why do you think s/he is dressed in those clothes?
- Where do you think s/he is (going)?

I used to ignore or skip over the pictures that students found offensive (in my context, for example, these include pictures of people at the beach and women wearing sleeveless tops), but now I realize these pictures can be a gold mine of cultural information.

Ask the following questions:

- When was the last time you put on makeup?
- What was the occasion? What makeup did you put on? What color was it?
- Why did you put on makeup?

Small cultural differences that exist even in classes that are culturally quite homogenous can be amplified and then exploited.

- How would you have felt if you had not put on makeup at that time?
- Did anyone comment on your makeup? What did they say?

This activity should lead to a fruitful discussion, by both male and female students, of positive and negative stereotypes about people who wear certain kinds of makeup—or about when fancy dress is worn, what sportswear is used for, etc. In one class, it led to a discussion of what wearing bright red lipstick and heavy eye makeup connotes. The activity is a useful way to start to address the topics of cultural assumptions and stereotypes.

Alternatives: Other topics to discuss include formal dress, national dress, sportswear, beachwear, hiking boots, hats, scarfs, flip-flops, glasses, headsets, gloves, perfume, belts, masks, prayer shawls, and jewelry.

Group 2. Amplifying Diversity within a Class

Small cultural differences that exist even in classes that are culturally quite homogenous can be amplified and then exploited with the aim of helping students notice and analyze them. In general EFL lessons, these activities could supplement, for example, the topic of "personalities."

Activity: Left or Right

Context: Warm-up activity with movement

Time needed: 5 minutes

Pre-teach/review: This activity can be used to review recently learned vocabulary.

Procedure: Ask students to stand up and to head to the left or right side of the classroom as you (or a student) call out various contrasting situations. It is best to use abstract concepts that force the students to think.

Instruction: Go to the left for the first situation, or go to the right for the second, according to your preference.

1. *Study alone* versus *study with friends*
2. *Couch potato* versus *fitness fanatic*
3. *Photos of scenery* versus *photos of people*
4. *Bookworm* versus *party animal*
5. *Eating at home* versus *eating out*
6. *Last year* versus *next year*
7. *Find a job in your hometown* versus *find a job in another place*
8. *Sweet* versus *sour*

Teacher: Now you give me some ideas. What did you find out about yourself that you didn't know before?

Students soon work out that they might want to be in the middle, in that they can decide on neither or both of the choices. In its own way, this is progress in understanding cultural differences. I know the students are starting to understand the activity when they suggest contrasts that they are aware of, and I use insights from this activity in lessons about cultural values. (It is important also that students do not see these choices as "labels," but as evidence that people sharing the same general culture can have many differences in the lifestyles they prefer.)

Alternative: This activity can be adapted to serve as a review of almost any vocabulary.

Activity: Grandpa and Grandma

Context: Teaching "Where are you from?" and "Who do you look like?"

Time needed: 20 minutes

Pre-teach/review: Various personal characteristics, personalities, inheritable traits

Procedure: Have students ask and answer these questions in pairs or small groups:

- What ethnicity are you?
- What ethnicity is your father?
- What ethnicity is your mother?
- What are the ethnicities of your father's parents?
- What are the ethnicities of your mother's parents?

Follow-up questions:

- What is something you inherited from each of your parents and grandparents?
- What is something you have learned from each of them?

When students acknowledge that they have a parent, grandparent, or great-grandparent not from the majority ethnic group, the class starts to look and feel a little less homogenous. A class discussion, with as much information as students are comfortable sharing, can lead to discoveries about similarities and differences in family backgrounds that students never realized existed among their members of the class.

Alternative: Ask students about people of other ethnic groups who have married into their extended family.

Activity: Family Tree

Context: In listening/speaking classes, there is often a pair activity in which students practice using kinship terms, with students asking questions about family members and then drawing each other's family tree.

Time needed: 10 minutes

Pre-teach/review: Kinship terms, family tree

Procedure: Give the following instructions: "Draw your family tree, including all your cousins. Mark with one color relatives you are allowed to marry. Then, in pairs, swap family trees and ask each other about any differences you notice."

I draw my family tree, too, and students where I teach are usually surprised that in my culture, no one in my family tree is a potential spouse! In other contexts, students might have the opposite reaction. This can lead to a discussion about local traditions, religious norms, taboos, and genetics.

Activity: Traditions

Context: Holidays, celebrations, life-cycle events

Time needed: 20 to 30 minutes

Pre-teach/review: Vocabulary related to the traditions and events to be described—for example, related to a wedding: *bride*, *groom*, *marriage attendants*, *officiate*, *ceremony*, *vows*

Procedure: Elicit answers to the following questions:

- What is a wedding ceremony like in your family? Who is invited?
- Where are weddings held? What do you wear?
- Do any members of your extended family have different wedding practices?

- What do you know about weddings in other traditions?

Students' understanding of the traditions they have grown up with can be used to find interesting similarities and differences in beliefs and practices.

Activity: What Languages Do You Speak?

Context: This question is used for various reasons from early lessons in many EFL classes.

Time needed: 10 minutes

Pre-teach/review: Use of simple past and present perfect

Procedure: Elicit answers to the following questions:

- What language did you learn first, as a baby? Who did you learn it from? Did you learn any particular dialect?
- What language did you learn after that? From whom? How old were you?
- What other languages have you learned? From whom? At what age?

Students' life stories provide experiences of different cities and towns, rural and urban settings, and living as part of the majority or a minority culture. In my context, acquiring Indonesian as the first language tends to be more of an urban phenomenon, and acquiring an ethnic language first is more of a rural phenomenon. Also, if students grow up as part of a minority, they often learn the language(s) of their parents and grandparents first, and then the language of the major ethnic group around them. This variety of language-acquisition experience also highlights differences between students.

Alternatives: If the students all use a national language, for example, this activity can be shifted to ask about dialects. Students can move around and/or get into groups, depending on the dialect they use or know. In each group, they can discuss how much they use their dialect and form a line according to how much they use it—from using that dialect *most of the time*, to *only at home*, to *only with certain relatives*, down to *can understand the dialect but not speak it*. Or they can form a line from *very comfortable using the dialect* to *not comfortable using the dialect*.

Group 3. Exploiting Students' Cultural Ideals

The two aspects above, of focusing on the everyday and looking for cultural differences, can be carried forward together with the following activities, which provide a segue to beliefs and worldview. I find I need to do a few activities like those that follow before introducing the topic of cultural values (see the Group 4 activities).

Activity: Heroes

Context: Reading passages in EFL textbooks at the intermediate level and above often include fables and condensed folktales.

Time needed: 15 minutes for each part

Pre-teach/review: Connotative meanings

Procedure: Elicit answers to the following questions:

Part 1

- Do you know both positive and negative words for large people, tall people, short people, clever people, uneducated people, and so on in the languages you speak?
- Are these words the same for both men and women?
- What about the words you know in English?

Part 2

- What are the characteristics of the ideal man or ideal woman, or the heroes, of folktales in your culture?

Have students discuss answers with someone from a different hometown, ethnicity, or faith,

or someone who speaks a different dialect. Then ask the following:

- Are your ideas the same or different? Which details are similar, and which are different?

- Are there any details that one person mentioned, but the other person didn't? What are those details?

Activity: Ideal Home

Context: Diagrams and floor plans of rooms are often provided in EFL textbooks as part of lessons about descriptions and using prepositions.

Time needed: 20 minutes

Pre-teach/review: Describing, prepositions of place

Procedure: Give the following instructions: "Draw a floor plan of your ideal home. Do not show your drawing to other students. When you're done, sit back-to-back with another student. Describe your ideal home to your partner, who will draw it. Then switch roles. Compare your ideal homes. What is different? What is the same?"

Students then ask each other these questions:

- Why is _____ near the front door?

- Why is _____ far from the front door?

- Why is _____ near the back door?

- Which parts of the house do guests go into?

- What is on the walls? What is on the floor?

Alternatives: Students can describe the area outside their ideal house, or they can describe a school, market or shopping mall, or theater. If possible, and if students are comfortable with the idea, it may be helpful to hang students' drawings around the classroom so they have time to look at them and discuss or reflect further on the heterogeneity that has been uncovered.

Group 4. Focusing on Other Cultures

When students' awareness of cultural differences within the class is established, it is time to encourage students to become *other-centered*. Canagarajah (2007, 931) reminds us that

> to accept deviations as the norm, one must display positive attitudes to variation and be open to unexpectedness. Participants have to be radically other-centered. They have to be imaginative and alert to make on-the-spot decisions in relation to the forms and conventions employed by the other. It is clear that communication in multilingual communities involves a different mind-set and practices from the mind-set and practices in monolingual communities.

The following activities help students put themselves into the shoes of people from other cultures. Students can then move beyond stories of their own and others' misunderstandings to real empathy.

Activity: Ambiguous

Context: Finding the differences; EFL students are often asked to sit back-to-back in pairs and describe similar pictures to find the differences.

Time needed: 5 minutes to look at the picture, 15 minutes for the discussion

Pre-teach/review: Prepositions of place, use of *there is/are*

Procedure: Show students a picture that can be interpreted in more than one way. Genzel and Cummings (2010, 1) use the two faces/vase and old woman/young woman drawings, and I have used these to good effect. Some students can see only one drawing, others immediately see two, yet others see two after some time. Students

People of various cultures are exposed to the same world but can interpret things quite differently.

get frustrated when they are told there are at least two drawings if they can only see one!

Ask students the following questions:

- What can you see in this picture?
- How many people are in the picture?
- If you can see one thing but your friend sees something different, what does that mean?
- Have you ever had an experience where what you thought was happening was different than what other people thought was happening?

This description exercise can be extended to teach about culture. The point is made that each person interprets the world using his or her own cultural worldview. People of various cultures are exposed to the same world but can interpret things quite differently. Students often tell stories about experiences of thinking someone was angry with them when in fact the other person was not. Intercultural competence means accepting that others have different perspectives and then seeking to understand their perspectives.

Alternatives: Brainstorm different uses of a tea towel, a coat hanger, a paper clip, a plastic bag, a comb, a saucepan, or other items familiar to students (adapted from Klippel 1984).

Activity: Culture Shock

Context: Tourism, customs, vacations, studying abroad, travel

Time needed: 20 minutes

Pre-teach/review: Narrative time markers such as *last year*, *when I was in high school*, *at first*, *as soon as*, *immediately*, *after that*, and *finally*

Procedure: I sometimes tell a story like the following to get this discussion started:

> Sometimes when I am trying to take a photo of a beautiful sunset [or mountain, lake, or garden], my friends immediately get in front of the camera and ruin my photo. Any comments?

As a warm-up, ask students the following questions:

- Have you visited other parts of this country or another country?
- What was unusual or difficult for you? Was anything strange or annoying? Tell your story.

Part of Speech	Vocabulary for Comparing	Vocabulary for Contrasting
Verbs	compare, resemble	contrast, differ
Nouns	comparison, similarity	contrast, difference
Adjectives	similar, same	different, dissimilar
Conjunctions	as, like, in the same way	however, although, whereas

Table 1. Vocabulary for comparing and contrasting

Not all of these activities are appropriate in every context, and you might have to choose other examples or prompts.

- What do you think would be the most confusing thing for a foreign tourist who came to your hometown? Why? Do you have a story you can tell about this?

I ask questions like these to show students how much they have learned about culture. The students are moving from focusing on the tangible, concrete parts of culture, objects, and behaviors to the intangible, abstract, and associated cultural values and beliefs.

Activity: Movie Clips

Context: Compare and contrast

Materials and time needed: One or two movie clips of a few minutes each; 20 to 25 minutes for discussion

Pre-teach/review: Vocabulary for comparing and contrasting (see Table 1)

Procedure: Elicit answers to the following questions regarding a movie clip showing street crossings:

- What differences have you noticed between how pedestrian crossings and traffic lights are used in your culture and in the movie clip?
- Why do you think pedestrian crossings and traffic lights are used differently?
- How could this be confusing to a foreign visitor to your town?

Alternatives: Scenes other than street crossings may be appropriate in some situations, and still photographs can be used instead of movie clips. Students can also discuss uses of various objects found in the home and classroom, pieces of clothing, gestures, and *false friend* words—those words that appear similar in two languages but have different meanings. Additional topics include different ideas about refreshments, ways of traveling, purposes of roads, education, and responsibilities of family members and other relatives.

Group 5. Providing Alternative Cultural Experiences

Bennett (2004, 74) reminds us that the key issue when adapting culturally "is the ability to have an alternative cultural experience." These experiences, as in the previous activities, could start from the students' own culture(s) and then progress to foreign cultural practices.

Activity: Class Party

Context: Food, eating, kitchens, dining rooms, restaurants, picnics

Time needed: One hour for the simulation, 20 minutes for the discussion

Pre-teach/review: "I feel _____" and "It feels _____," and vocabulary such as *comfortable/uncomfortable*, *awkward/natural*, *formal/informal*, and *impolite/respectful*

Procedure: A fun and relatively easy topic to start with is food. This would not just be about trying foods from different places—local first, then from other regions, then foreign—but eating while sitting on the floor, sitting on a chair, sitting at a table, standing up, or walking around; eating using a bowl, a plate, a paper towel, a spoon, a fork, fingers, or chopsticks; having or not having water or another drink while eating; going on a picnic or eating with a formal table setting; drinking heavily sugared or sugarless tea or coffee, very hot drinks, or very cold drinks; and conversing or being silent while eating and drinking. EFL topics of

No students … should be forced to talk about or reveal information they do not feel comfortable sharing.

food, holidays, and travel lend themselves to having a class party.

Ask students to form pairs and discuss one of the experiences that was new to them.

- How did it feel to eat _____ and/or drink _____?

Then initiate a class discussion with a question:

- How might a visitor from another culture feel when faced with your way of eating and drinking?

Alternatives: Simulations of classrooms, visiting the doctor, and attending a wedding or a baby shower in different cultures are other possibilities.

CONCLUSION

As mentioned, not all of these activities are appropriate in every context, and you might have to choose other examples or prompts, depending on your students' needs and comfort levels. Be aware of topics and issues that are sensitive in your context, and recognize that situations in students' personal and family lives will affect how comfortable they are discussing certain topics and revealing information about themselves and their families. But when students recognize that some of their classmates are more (or less) willing to discuss certain topics than they are, that is part of developing students' awareness of differences among people and is a learning experience that can be exploited. No students, though, should be forced to talk about or reveal information they do not feel comfortable sharing.

Even the most homogenous EFL class will have some cultural variety. Creating and using activities that unearth these cultural differences is a useful preliminary step that raises awareness and curiosity about these differences. This awareness can help students analyze cultural values and beliefs and improve understanding and effective communication skills for actually relating to people of other cultures. The activities suggested are just a sample of the ways this could be achieved in both general EFL classes and specialized ICC classes.

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READER'S GUIDE

This guide is designed to enrich your reading of the articles in this issue. You may choose to read them on your own, taking notes or jotting down answers to the discussion questions below. Or you may use the guide to explore the articles with colleagues.

For example, many teachers discuss *Forum* at regularly scheduled meetings with department colleagues and members of teachers' groups, or in teacher-training courses and workshops. Often, teachers choose an article for their group to read before the meeting or class, then discuss that article when they meet. Teachers have found it helpful to take notes on articles or write a response to an article and bring that response to share in a discussion group. Another idea is for teachers to try a selected activity or technique described in one of the articles, then report back to the group on their experiences and discuss positives, negatives, and possible adaptations for their teaching context.

Task-Based Reading Activities Using Authentic Materials and Skills (Pages 2–9)

Pre-Reading

1. What materials do you use when you teach reading? How much freedom do you have to choose reading materials for your classes?
2. What, to you, are authentic materials? What access do you have to authentic materials? How do you use them in your teaching?
3. Have you used task-based lessons in your teaching? What did your students do? What was your role? How satisfied were you with the results?

Post-Reading

1. What are your feelings about using stations, as described in the article? What are the main benefits? In your teaching situation, what is the biggest challenge with using stations? What are some ways you can work around or eliminate that challenge?
2. The author gives examples of authentic materials—"old receipts, tickets, brochures, and notes that are lying around most people's homes or classrooms"—but there are many others. By yourself or with colleagues, gather authentic materials from your school, community, or homes. You can also ask students to collect some. What types did you find? How can you categorize or separate them to be placed at stations?
3. Look at the three worksheet examples in Table 1. Notice that questions 1 through 6 are the same for all three texts; only questions 7 and 8 differ. Try creating similar worksheets for authentic texts you find. How long does it take to create each worksheet? Could you ask colleagues to help you create worksheets and start a collection? Could your students eventually help create more for future use?

4. Table 2 gives example questions for a travel-based scenario. How could you adapt the scenario and questions based on your situation and the materials you have available for students?
5. Take another look at the suggestions in the Further Applications section near the end of the article. Do these suggestions give you ideas about using this activity—or similar activities—in different ways for different purposes? How else might you use stations in your classes?
6. If you don't teach a "reading" course, how might you incorporate this activity into one or more of your courses? Think of topics or themes that you cover. Could this activity help students explore any of those topics or themes in a new way?

Finding Heterogeneity in Cultural Homogeneity (Pages 10–21)

Pre-Reading

1. What does the title of the article mean to you? What do you expect to read about in this article?
2. How important to you is including "culture" in your teaching? How important do you think it is to your students?
3. Would you say that your students basically share the same culture? Or do they have different cultural backgrounds?

Post-Reading

1. For you, what is the most important takeaway from this article? Why do you think the author felt it was important to write the article?
2. Did anything in the article surprise you? If so, what? Do you know why you were surprised?
3. In the opening paragraph, the author notes that in her teaching context, most or all of her students share the same first language and cultural background and are about the same age. Is that similar to the situation in which you teach? What are possible advantages to teaching students with similar backgrounds? What are potential limitations?
4. The author suggests a number of activities but says, "It is possible and even likely that not all of the activities will be appropriate where you teach." Are any of the suggested activities inappropriate where you teach? Why do you think so?
5. Try one of the activities with your students (or, for practice, with your colleagues). You might try a fairly basic one, such as Good Morning (page 12). What are the results? What differences, if any, does the activity reveal?

Writing about a Peacemaker

by JIMALEE SOWELL AND BISHWA RAJ GAUTAM

Boulding (2000) has pointed out that "Conflict is ubiquitous." In today's world, unfortunately, conflict does seem to be everywhere, which means that now perhaps more than ever, education needs to play a critical role in helping students develop the skills of conflict resolution, respect for difference and diversity, and compassion for others. As language instructors, we are in a privileged position from which to create scenarios and activities that provide students with opportunities to practice these skills. Since the beginning of the twentieth century, many English language teaching methods have emphasized the development of oral language proficiency (Howatt and Widdowson 2004; Richards 2015), and in current teaching practice, writing skills are often overlooked.

However, second-language learners increasingly need effective writing skills in English for academic and professional purposes (Richards 2015), as well as for personal and social purposes. To date, peace education (PE) activities in the English language classroom have mostly focused on speaking. This article presents an activity that can help fill the gap in the lack of resources on writing activities for PE in the English language classroom. Using PE as a framework, students read and write about a peacemaker to reflect on the meaning of peace and how it can be achieved.

WHAT IS PEACE EDUCATION?

PE, also sometimes called peace learning, is both a philosophy and a process. It focuses on the teaching and learning of skills for resolving conflict nonviolently and creating a sustainable environment, with the aim of building a better world for everyone (Bajaj and Hantzopoulos 2016; Harris 2008; Harris and Morrison 2013; Oxford 2013). PE focuses on developing skills such as listening, reflection, cooperation, problem solving, and conflict resolution, and in many contexts it focuses on human rights (Harris 2008). PE aims to create models of learning though curricula, pedagogy, dialogue-based interactions, and analysis of multiple perspectives of historical narratives (Bajaj 2014; Bekerman and Zembylas 2012; Hantzopoulos 2010, 2011; Reardon 2000).

PE activities can be carried out in any setting, either formally in institutions of learning or informally through community-based PE initiatives, with participants of various ages, from preschool to beyond higher education (Harris and Morrison 2013). There is no one single blueprint for a PE curriculum, as each context and each group of learners are necessarily unique (Bajaj 2008), and the tools and techniques of PE will reflect each context. Two of the major components

Using [peace education] as a framework, students read and write about a peacemaker to reflect on the meaning of peace and how it can be achieved.

of PE focus on (a) reflecting on definitions of peace and (b) learning about the lives and work of peacemakers (Oxford 2013). These two components shape the focus of this activity.

The objectives are as follows:

- Students will research and consider definitions of peace.
- Students will become aware of some important human-rights activists and peacemakers.
- Students will reflect on ways in which activists have worked for peace.
- Students will develop a short piece of writing about a peacemaker.
- Students will design and display a poster.
- Students will apply critical thinking in balancing visual and written information in creating content for display or distribution.

PART ONE: REFLECTING ON PEACE AND PEACE ACTIVISM

Activity 1: Warm-up

In pairs or small groups, have students brainstorm their ideas associated with the words *peace* and *peacemaker*. After a few minutes, elicit students' ideas and write them on the board or post them in a central location (such as a shared Google Docs file) if teaching online. This should lead to a whole-class or small-group discussion

Questions	Notes
What actions did the peacemaker in your text take in order to achieve peace?	
What three to five challenges or difficulties did the peacemaker face in working toward achieving peace?	
What did this peacemaker teach the world about peace?	
What long-lasting impact has this peacemaker had on others?	
My question(s):	
Other important notes:	

Figure 1. Chart to guide students' note-taking about a peacemaker

about the meaning of peace and the role of a peacemaker; you can expect that there will be many ideas.

You can use the following questions to prompt the discussion:

- What is peace?
- How do people achieve peace?
- Can you give examples of how someone has acted for peace, change, or human rights?

Activity 2: Reading about a peacemaker
Students will read about peacemakers. You might choose to focus on peacemakers within your local context or in the global context. If your class is small, each student can be assigned a different peacemaker. If you have a large class, some students might be assigned the same peacemaker. The book *Great Peacemakers: True Stories from Around the World* by Ken Beller and Heather Chase (2008) is an excellent resource for texts on peacemakers. If you do not have access to this book, however, you can provide students with a list of peacemakers such as Martin Luther King, Jr., Mahatma Gandhi, Desmond Tutu, Jane Goodall, Nader Khalili, Rosa Parks, and Mother Teresa. Simple English Wikipedia (simple.wikipedia.org) is an excellent online resource for English language learners; there, they can find useful information about peacemakers and activists that is written in basic English.

Rosa Parks: Mother of the Civil Rights Movement

Rosa Parks was a civil rights activist. She has been called the "Mother of the Civil Rights Movement." Rosa is best known for her actions as a passenger on a bus in 1955. At that time in the United States, black and white passengers were segregated on buses. White people sat in the front, and black people sat in the back. Rosa was tired of being discriminated against. One day, a bus driver asked Rosa to move to the back of the bus and give her seat to a white passenger. Rosa refused to change seats. She was arrested for her refusal. Rosa's actions led to the Montgomery Bus Boycott. This boycott caused a change in the law. With the new law, black and white people were no longer required to sit in different sections on buses. Rosa's refusal was an important action in the movement against racial discrimination. Rosa helped to teach the world that all people should be treated equally.

Rosa Parks

Figure 2. Sample museum poster

You might choose to focus on peacemakers within your local context or in the global context.

Encourage students to take notes as they read. You can provide them with a chart to guide their note-taking (see Figure 1).

PART TWO: PRODUCING A POSTER

Step 1: Analyzing a model

Show your learners a sample display poster. (See Figure 2 for an example.) Using the three components of a rhetorical situation (genre, purpose, and audience), analyze the model with students. (See Figure 3 for a guide.) In addition, ask students how choices about the design of the poster might affect the reader.

Tell students that they are going to make a museum-style poster like the one in the example, based on their peacemaker. Students should imagine that their poster will be displayed in a museum. They are going to make a physical poster (on poster board) with text and visuals that they will display for their classmates. (Digital posters can be made in PowerPoint and applications such as Canva.)

Let students know that the text they write will be no more than 150 to 200 words, so they will need to focus on highlighting the most important aspects of their peacemaker and the peacemaker's work. You might tell them, "Imagine that you are a visitor to a museum, looking at displays. What would you want to learn about

Rhetorical situation	
1. Genre	What is the genre (type) of this piece of writing?
2. Purpose	What is the purpose of this piece of writing?
3. Audience	Who is the intended audience for this piece of writing?
Design	
Design choices (Think about the layout, font type and size, colors, design, length of the text, picture, and so on.)	How do design choices influence the written message?

Figure 3. Questions for analyzing the model

Write your name and one thing you learned about this peacemaker from this poster.

Name	One thing you learned

Figure 4. Sample grid for comments on peacemakers

peacemakers? How much would you be able to read? What kind of information would stick with you?"

Step 2: Drafting

Ask students to write a draft about their peacemaker. Recommend that they refer to the notes they created while they were reading.

Students can use the following questions to guide their writing:

- Who is your text about?
- What actions did the peacemaker take in order to achieve peace?
- What challenges or difficulties did your peacemaker face in working toward achieving peace? How did your peacemaker overcome them?
- What contribution or contributions has your peacemaker made to the world?
- Has reading this text influenced you? If so, how?

When students have finished their draft, provide them with the feedback they need to revise. At this stage, you could use self-editing, peer feedback, teacher feedback, or all three. Students will do one or more rounds of revision, as needed.

Step 3: Moving from draft to poster

When students have completed their final drafts, they will put their text in poster form. If students make the posters by using PowerPoint, or online applications like Canva, make sure they know where and how they can later get their posters printed. In a low-resource context, students can write on poster board and add visuals by drawing or cutting and pasting images from magazines and other materials.

PART THREE: DISPLAYING THE POSTERS

Step 1: Hanging the posters

Students bring their posters to class and post them on the walls. Next to each poster, put a sheet of paper where other students will be able to write comments. (See Figure 4 for an example of a comment sheet.) If your class is large, you can divide the class into two groups. Students in Group A will post their posters on one side of the room, and Group B students will post their posters on the other side of the room. Students in Group A then go to Group B's posters, and students in Group B go to Group A's posters.

In an online context, students can display their digital posters in a Zoom session or post them on a class Facebook page.

Step 2: Holding a gallery walk

The purpose of the gallery walk is to give the writer of each poster feedback on what the

readers have learned and to help readers of the posters reflect on what they have learned about different peacemakers. In a face-to-face class, students walk around the classroom as though they were in a museum and read the posters. They must write comments about at least three of their classmates' posters on the sheets provided.

In an online class, students can share their posters in Zoom, and their classmates can write comments in the chat box. Alternatively, students can upload their posters to a class Facebook page, where they could write comments about each other's posters. (This could be done as a homework assignment, outside of class time.)

Note that students' comments should relate to the content on the poster and the information learned; the comments should *not* be an evaluation of the poster.

Step 3: Publishing the posters

If you have your own classroom or a central location for display at your school, you might ask your students if they would like to have their posters on display. If students have digital copies of their poster, they can upload them to a class website or other Internet location. You (or your students) can take pictures of the posters and upload them to a class website. If you do intend to display your students' work publicly, make sure you have their permission and make sure they understand that there is no penalty if they decide they do not want to display their work in a public venue.

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Using an Asynchronous Video App to Stimulate Spontaneous Oral Interaction

by ANNA CIRIANI-DEAN

Two key ingredients for developing language skills are output and interaction. Without actually using the language and negotiating meaning with others, learners may comprehend the language but may never become true "speakers." For this reason, most English language teachers carefully engineer their lessons to integrate opportunities for authentic interaction. These activities become particularly crucial in English as a foreign language classrooms, where students do not encounter many natural opportunities to practice speaking English outside class time. Furthermore, the challenge of simulating authentic speaking tasks outside the classroom and the tendency to prioritize written skills for at-home tasks limit speaking practice largely to the classroom for many students.

One solution to these limitations is the use of computer-mediated communication (often referred to as "CMC") tools and of social networking sites (SNSs). Indeed, studies have shown that these tools can increase both written and spoken output by learners, expose them to a wider range of language use, and boost their participation in cyber-communities, among other potential benefits (Reinhardt 2019). These platforms, in other words, offer ways to extend language use beyond the four walls of the classroom, especially for speaking. Whether through synchronous video-chatting platforms or through asynchronous voice messages, these tools offer a valuable resource to teachers and learners who wish to extend learning beyond the classroom walls, especially as traditionally in-person courses shift to online formats.

Recent years in particular have seen exponential growth in the number of platforms available to teachers and students for virtual interaction. These fall along two lines: tools developed exclusively for educational purposes (i.e., educational technology) and tools developed for general use, such as SNSs. On the side of education-specific tools, for example, Flipgrid was developed specifically for educators to promote asynchronous oral discussions and collaboration around a given topic. On the side of SNSs, applications such as WhatsApp, Snapchat, and many others were created to facilitate communication and connection with friends, family, and/or public audiences, but they can be adapted for use in an educational setting.

Teachers, then, simply have to choose the platform that best suits their objectives and learning environment. They must ask themselves questions such as these:

- *What do I want my students to achieve?* As usual, teachers should start by defining clear objectives.

Recent years in particular have seen exponential growth in the number of platforms available to teachers and students for virtual interaction.

Students will be more likely to use a tool they already interact with on a daily basis or that resembles one of their preferred applications.

- *How does each platform support these objectives? What tasks does it facilitate?* If the platform is being used simply for technology's sake instead of as a means to enhance student learning, then teachers might reconsider using it.

- *What are the trade-offs of using these platforms?* In some cases, practicality might trump some of the benefits of using a virtual platform.

- *What platforms do students have access to?* Most social-media sites are restricted to users over 13, while educational tools are available to broader age groups, and some tools may not be available in every country.

- *What platforms are students most comfortable with and engaged in?* Students will be more likely to use a tool they already interact with on a daily basis or that resembles one of their preferred applications. Younger students tend to love using social media and other apps on their phones and are generally open to trying something new, while older learners might be less amenable to adopting a new language-learning tool.

- *What platforms am I familiar with or willing to familiarize myself with?* Taking on a new technology can be overwhelming, so teachers should be conscious of how much novelty they can handle.

In this article, I wish to share my ideas for using one specific mobile application, Marco Polo, for stimulating spontaneous oral communication and providing feedback to learners. I begin by explaining the features of Marco Polo that make it ideal for language learning. I then provide instructions on how to use the app for a learning activity, and I describe two tasks that can be implemented on it.

WHAT IS MARCO POLO?

Marco Polo is a mobile-only application that allows users to easily record videos and send them directly to a single user or group. Its interface is simple: videos play automatically when opened, users tap the video camera icon to start recording, and there are few special effects or other features. Unlike video-based stories and live videos on platforms such as Snapchat, Instagram, and Facebook, messages on Marco Polo are restricted to a single recipient or small group rather than a broader following; that makes the experience more intimate and targeted. Furthermore, the messages do not disappear after 24 hours, making it possible for learners and instructors to rewatch videos multiple times, for comprehension and feedback purposes. Recipients are notified as soon as the speaker starts recording, and they can listen both synchronously and asynchronously.

Because of its highly personal and simple interface, the app discourages learners from overly planning or rerecording their responses and thus stimulates spontaneous language production. This spontaneity,

combined with the fact that users do not need to plan a specific time to meet but instead can watch videos asynchronously at their leisure, makes the app a useful tool for simulating in-person interaction without the hassle of coordinating meeting times.

Marco Polo is best for teenage and adult learners who have access to their own mobile devices and are above the minimum age (13) to download the app. Other apps with similar affordances include the educational app Flipgrid and SNSs with video-messaging capabilities, such as WhatsApp.

GETTING STARTED

Follow these steps to create your profile on Marco Polo and implement interactive learning activities:

1. Download Marco Polo and set up your profile. The app is available on iPhone or Android devices at the App Store or Play Store, respectively, and offers a free version as well as a paid premium version. The free version is adequate for the activities described in this article.

2. Click on the "+" sign at the top right of the home page and select "New Group." Do not add anyone to the group; instead, click through until you come back to the home page.

3. Locate the group you created, select the three-vertical-dots symbol next to it on the right, choose "Edit Group," and click on "Invite via Group Link." You can copy the link and send it to your students, which is easier than gathering your students' phone numbers and adding each one manually.

4. Have your students download Marco Polo, send them the link you copied in Step 3, and ask them to join your group. Depending on the task, you can create multiple groups if you would like students to interact with fewer classmates at a time; smaller groups might be more manageable for you and might make less-confident students feel more comfortable in participating.

5. Watch and assist as your students join your group. I recommend recording a welcome message for them and inviting them to introduce themselves in the group (or assign another simple task) so they can learn how the app works.

6. Assign a prompt. Record yourself providing instructions to the task you want your students to complete. To do so, enter the group and press the blue record button, shaped like a video camera. (With the premium version, you can upload a video you have already recorded on your phone by choosing "Photo" on the menu options below the record button.)

7. Provide ongoing feedback. A few times during the activity, check students' contributions to the group, take notes on some of their observations, and provide oral feedback on what they say in video responses.

8. Follow up in class with an activity that mirrors or expands on the Marco Polo task.

TYPES OF TASKS

Marco Polo, in my experience, lends itself to two formats of tasks: (1) collaborative and (2) dialogic. I will now describe two tasks in order to demonstrate how to apply these formats.

Task 1: Collaborative Format

In the collaborative format, students contribute individual responses to a collection of videos and create a shared product. An example of a collaborative task is one I implemented in a narrative-writing course for first-year university students, though it could easily be adapted for lower-level

I asked students to take notes on what they saw in my video and to record themselves describing in as much depth as possible one or two details they noticed.

learners. The objectives of the task were to expand vocabulary for describing indoor spaces and objects and to practice providing detailed descriptions. The task was, therefore, to co-construct a detailed description of a home interior—in this case, my apartment—using Marco Polo to contribute pieces of the description.

In our Marco Polo group, I uploaded a video of myself walking slowly through my apartment, pausing on the many details in different rooms. In the instructions, I asked students to take notes on what they saw in my video and to record themselves describing in as much depth as possible one or two details they noticed, without repeating anything their classmates had already said. I first recorded the instructions and then recorded the apartment video, so they knew what to look for.

The students had two days to record their response, and each student focused on different details. By the end of the two days, they had generated a complete description of the apartment, with details on the position, size, colors, and other features of objects within it.

At regular intervals, I watched the videos students posted and recorded targeted feedback. I provided alternative vocabulary they could use to describe what they saw, corrected pronunciation, and praised particularly accurate descriptions to impress certain vocabulary in them and encourage detailed descriptions. Students were thankful for the consistent and personal feedback and often followed up with a question or left a message to acknowledge comprehension.

The task was implemented in a writing course, so as follow-up, students wrote a detailed description of a room in their house, using the vocabulary and descriptive skills they had developed in the oral task on Marco Polo. For support, they were able to refer back to the videos on Marco Polo and other materials I posted.

Beyond this example, the collaborative format can be used for a variety of tasks, such as a collaborative storytelling task in which students co-construct a story, with each student adding the next action of the story.

Task 2: Dialogic Format

In the dialogic format, students treat their Marco Polo group as a forum for exchanging ideas and opinions, responding directly to each other as in a face-to-face conversation. One example of a dialogic task took place in a critical-thinking course I taught, again at the university level. In the course, students learned to think critically about contemporary issues and to assert their own opinions in response to them. The objectives of this task were to formulate an opinion on a given topic, to practice the rhetorical moves involved in oral argumentation, and to support the opinion with evidence. The task was to respond to a debate question and to engage in debate on the topic by using Marco Polo.

For this task, I split my class into groups of three or four students, each forming a separate Marco Polo group, so that the groups were manageable and students could respond easily to specific arguments presented by their peers. In each group, I recorded myself asking a question and had students argue their position on the topic with each other, supplying personal evidence to support their claims. I also instructed them explicitly to respond directly to their classmates (instead of just stating their position) and to participate at least three times in the conversation. Each group received a different yet related

The tasks helped [students] collaboratively generate a vast range of language and forced them to practice both their listening skills (while listening to their classmates' descriptions and arguments) and speaking skills (while posting their own descriptions and arguments).

question and had three days to complete their discussion. After three days, I rotated the topics so that each group received a new question to debate. Overall, each group debated two topics over the course of one week.

During these debates, I monitored the students' videos at regular intervals, redirected conversations, highlighted points for them to focus on, and provided language support as needed. As follow-up in class, each group met with the other two groups who had shared their topics, presented a summary of their debates, compared their answers to the debate questions, and discussed the feedback they had collectively received. In the long term, students were asked to write an argumentative essay on one of the two topics from the activity.

This format could be adapted for a lower level by choosing less-complex, more-personal topics to discuss or by having students complete role-play dialogues. It could also be used to create reading discussion groups instead of having students write reflections on readings in an online forum.

CONCLUSION

In both tasks, using Marco Polo ensured that each student had the space to participate, unlike in a classroom, where certain individuals might tend to dominate the conversation. While in some cases students seemed to have prepared a script, for the most part student responses seemed spontaneous, meaning they had the chance to practice using English naturally. The tasks helped them collaboratively generate a vast range of language and forced them to practice both their listening skills (while listening to their classmates' descriptions and arguments) and speaking skills (while posting their own descriptions and arguments). Equally important, the app allowed me to provide more-focused feedback than I might have been able to while balancing the competing demands of managing the classroom, as I was able to watch student responses multiple times without distractions. Also, the students seemed to have fun with the activities.

The simplicity of Marco Polo, combined with its interaction-driven design, makes it a useful tool for engaging language learners in speaking practice beyond the scope of the traditional classroom. I plan to use it for more online learning tasks in the future, and I hope other teachers will try it, too.

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Anna Ciriani-Dean was an English Language Fellow in Yerevan, Armenia, in 2019–2020 and a Virtual English Language Fellow in Armenia and Ukraine in 2020–2021. She holds an MA in applied linguistics from Teachers College at Columbia University and has worked as a language education specialist in a variety of settings in the United States and abroad.

Using "Place Mats" as a Prewriting Activity for Opinionated Essays

by MICHAEL HORVILLEUR AND HIRAM RUVALCABA

Have you ever tried facilitating a debate in an English classroom but then noticed that most of the students weren't participating? Perhaps you even realized that the debate took a lot less time than you had anticipated? Debating in English is a vital part of second-language acquisition. Not only does it help students with their speaking skills, but it also is an excellent way to prepare them to write opinionated essays. In this article, we will explore how you can use "place mats" to organize a debate that gives each student the chance to speak, and then how to use that debate to guide an opinionated essay afterwards.

Whenever teachers would like students to write an essay, it is imperative that the essay is preceded with a prewriting task. In our opinion, the best prewriting tasks usually involve some sort of speaking activity that enables students to explore the topic itself before writing. When it comes to writing an opinionated essay, debating is a natural prewriting activity because it requires students to formulate an opinion and to elaborate arguments that support it. This is almost identical to what they will have to do when writing an opinionated essay. In addition, debates allow students to hear other reasons that support their argument, as well as reasons that oppose their argument that they may not have thought of. That will ensure that each student understands the topic of his or her essay and, before writing, has a chance to evaluate different points of view.

In order for a teacher to facilitate a productive debate in the classroom, students must be provided with opinionated language that corresponds with their level of English. They must also have adequate time to prepare their statements and responses beforehand. It must then be made clear how the topics they discussed during the debate can be transitioned smoothly into an essay. Using place mats as the basis of a prewriting activity contains all of these processes in a single lesson.

The place mat activity we outline below begins by presenting students with a writing prompt that can be adapted to different topics and to different levels of English. Then, students must take time to write their opinion in the form of a thesis statement. It is important that students get in the habit of starting the writing process with a thesis statement because it will give their essay a clear purpose and, consequently, make their essay more organized. Afterwards, students will debate the writing prompt in groups and try to reach some sort of agreement.

PREPARATION OF MATERIALS

1. Distribute one post-it note per student. (If you do not have post-its, students can simply write in their corner of the place mat.)

In this article, we will explore how you can use "place mats" to organize a debate that gives each student the chance to speak.

2. Provide one place mat handout for each group of three or four students. (Groups of four work best.) If you cannot make copies of the place mat, ask students to draw one themselves on a piece of paper. Tell each group to take a piece of paper and choose one student to draw. Tell students that you will draw an example of a place mat on the board, and they should follow along.

   First, instruct students to draw a square in the middle of the paper. Then, draw a line that connects a side of the square to the edge of the paper. Repeat that step for each side of the square. (See Figure 1 for an example of what a blank place mat should look like.)

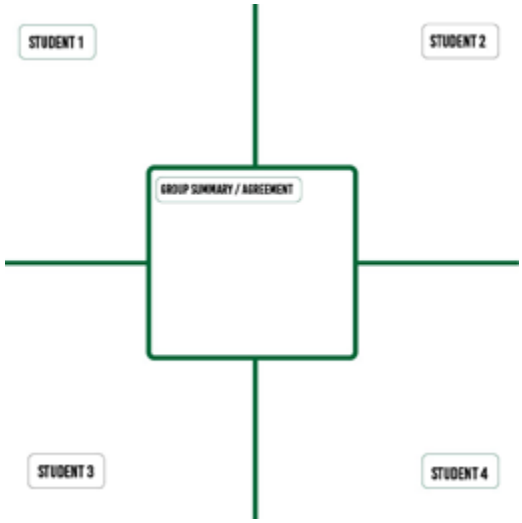

Figure 1. Blank place mat, ready to be used in the activity

Procedure

1. On the board, write the essential question—which also serves as the writing prompt—that will guide the debate. Your essential question should be on a controversial topic that can spark conversation. It should also be a question that the students can relate to and find interesting. An example might be, "*The director of our school is thinking of requiring all students to wear a uniform. Do you agree or disagree with this, and why?*" (Note that if your students already wear uniforms, you might change the first sentence to, "*The director of our school is thinking of not requiring all students to wear a uniform.*")

2. Have the class vote on responses to the essential question. Ask students who agree with the statement to raise their hand, count the raised hands, and put the total on the board. Repeat the procedure for students who disagree. This step can help get the students interested in the topic and eager to commence debating.

3. Place the students in groups of three or four. Try to organize the groups so students who have different opinions are in the same group. For instance, try not to put together four students who have agreed with the essential question. Be sure to mix them up so they will be able to debate. It may help to have students who agree raise their hands, and then move the students into groups accordingly.

4. Tell students they are going to be writing a thesis statement about the topic on a post-it. If your students have not written thesis statements before, explain that their thesis is basically their stance on, or opinion of, the essential question. To keep things simple, tell students that their thesis should consist of three things: their stance on the question and two reasons why they hold that opinion. You should write an example of a thesis statement on the board. We have placed an example below:

   "*In my opinion, students should be required to wear uniforms because it teaches students the importance of looking neat, and it saves students time when getting dressed in the morning.*"

   If the students have a relatively low level of English, it is a good idea to provide them with sentence starters on the board in order to help them formulate full sentences. Below are examples of sentence starters:

   - *In my opinion, . . .*

Using the place mat technique as a prewriting task can be modified easily for different ages, subjects, and levels of English.

- *I believe that …*
- *While I can see both points of view, I think …*

The teacher should walk around the room as the students are writing, make sure they are including all three parts in their thesis statements, and help out as needed.

5. Tell students to take turns in their groups to read their thesis statements out loud. The other students should listen carefully while each student reads, noting whether they agree or disagree and whether their reasons are the same. After all students in the group have read their thesis, each student places his or her post-it into a corner of the place mat.

6. It is time for the debate to begin! Students in each group should share their opinions and offer support for their reasons. Tell students that they must try to reach an agreement on the essential question. (They don't necessarily have to change their classmates' minds, but they should try to make an agreement and reach some kind of middle ground.) Whatever they decide, they must nominate one student to write the group's agreement in the center of the place mat.

Of course, depending on the topic, students might not be able to reach any sort of agreement. That is fine! They can simply write that they were not able to reach a consensus. If students are engaged in conversation and challenging one another's opinions, they are still meeting the objectives of the activity.

See Figure 2 for an example of a completed place mat.

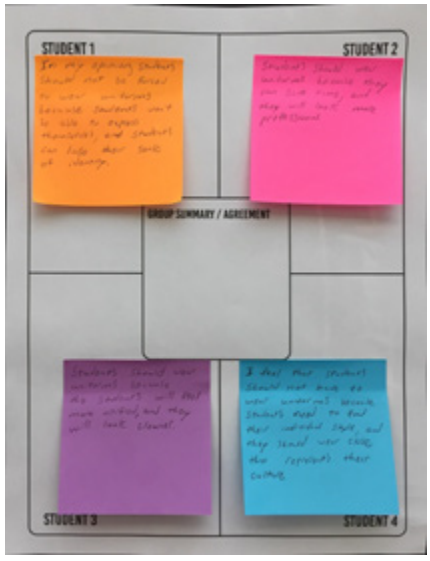

Figure 2. Completed place mat with student opinions

7. Have members of each group share their consensus with the class and explain how they reached it. This often leads to a class debate about the topic.

8. Have students rewrite their thesis statements on a separate piece of paper, based on anything they learned during the discussion. You can collect this rewritten thesis statement from each student, check it for comprehension, and make sure it is a statement that can be the basis of an essay.

9. With the results of the place mat, students should have enough information about the topic to begin writing an essay. They have a thesis statement, and they have heard reasons that support and oppose their opinion.

Having students defend an opinion orally is an effective way to prepare them to defend their opinion in an essay.

For the next lesson, you can show students how their thesis statement, and the reasons they used to support their argument, fit into a traditional essay format. You could do this by giving the students a sample essay and having them underline the writer's thesis, as well as the reasons he or she gives to support it.

ADAPTING

Using the place mat technique as a prewriting task can be modified easily for different ages, subjects, and levels of English. The simplest way to modify it is to change the essential question. For example, with older or more-proficient students, it is possible to ask more-complex essential questions that relate to politics, social issues, and historical events. Conversely, with younger or beginner students, it is recommended to ask simpler, easy-to-answer questions. Below are examples of essential questions that can be used:

Younger/Beginner Learners

- Should playing sports be mandatory in school?
- Should violent video games be banned?
- Should homework be banned?
- Is the Internet good for society?
- Should boys and girls go to different schools?

Older/Proficient Learners

- Should the world abolish the death penalty?
- Should university education be free?
- Should people be required to take an exam before they become eligible to vote?
- Should alcohol be banned?
- Should everyone in the world be forced to learn English as a second language?

CONCLUSION

Having students defend an opinion orally is an effective way to prepare them to defend their opinion in an essay. Using the place mat technique as a prewriting activity will ensure that every student has the chance to voice his or her opinion, and it will allow students to reflect on their own ideas before writing. If you want your students to learn to argue their ideas more clearly while improving their speaking, listening, and writing skills, activities like this will allow them to use the language freely, yet in an organized way. Good luck!

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Bojana Nikić Vujić was studying at the University of Belgrade in the early 2000s and considering her career options. She liked art history, Latin, English, and Spanish. Outside of her studies, travel was a favorite thing, as was working with children. So becoming an English teacher made sense; it was the "perfect mixture." There is a huge amount of variety and flexibility in English teaching, and Bojana—who says, "I like challenges"—has to this point already explored many paths.

Bojana Nikić Vujić: English teacher, teacher trainer, television personality, and textbook author are just some of the roles she has filled during her career as an educator.

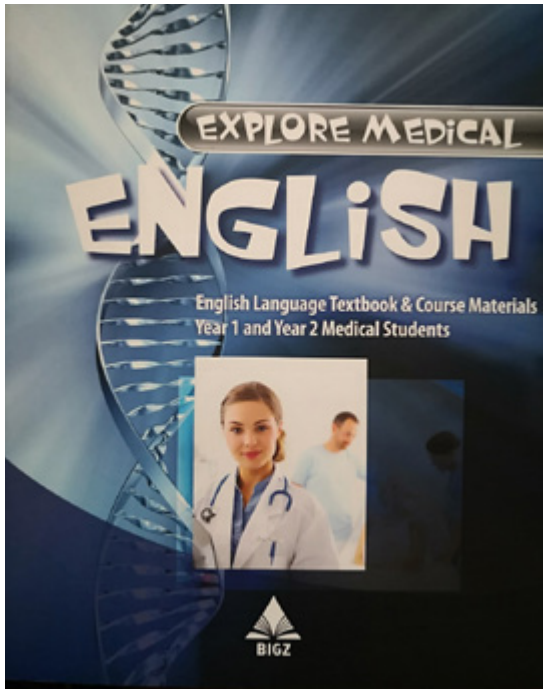
Ivo Andrić Elementary School in suburban Belgrade, where Bojana teaches

While still an undergraduate, Bojana worked part-time at kindergartens in Belgrade. She took home her master's degree in English Teaching and Methodology in 2005 from the University of Belgrade and worked as an instructor at the Faculty of Foreign Languages until 2007. Afterwards, she taught at a vocational secondary school specializing in pharmacy and physiotherapy, and because her course did not have a textbook, she wrote *Explore Medical English*. She continues to design and lead teacher-development courses, certified by the Institute for the Improvement of Education in Serbia. In 2014, however, she landed her current job at Ivo Andrić Elementary School, and she has been there ever since.

But a surprising new challenge arrived in 2020: a TV show.

In March, just as the COVID-19 pandemic was forcing schools to close their doors, the principal at Ivo Andrić—knowing how Bojana liked challenges—volunteered her for a show where she would teach English to students nationwide. Within days, Bojana found herself in a TV studio, filming during the mornings and preparing the next day's lesson in the afternoons.

"I was thinking how to do it," she said, "and not just stand there and talk, because it's too monotonous for the children." Incorporating interactivity was difficult, but she did her best, using games, quizzes, videos, songs, and movement tasks—anything to keep the kids' interest. There was no live audience and no children to provide energy, which was a challenge in itself. Her solution was to imagine that she was teaching her own students.



Bojana wrote the *Explore Medical English* textbook to meet a resource need while teaching at a vocational secondary school.

After a few lessons in the studio, and with more-stringent lockdowns being enforced in the city, Bojana began to record lessons at home on her computer, via screencasts. These screencasts were then broadcast on national television. Through April and May 2020, she recorded 24 lessons for third- and fourth-graders. Sometimes when she was out for a walk, children she didn't know would say to her, "Hello, Teacher! Are you from television?"

Each TV lesson had a link to homework so that students could then send their work to their regular teachers. In this way, Bojana included teachers, an approach that brought appreciation from educators around the country. Her TV lessons not only served as a model for virtual lessons, they also bought time for teachers managing the transition from face-to-face to online instruction.

Bojana was thinking not only of children and teachers at this time, but also of parents. Parents were themselves struggling to balance jobs with the demands of home learning, where the digital infrastructure of households could not always support whole families working and studying online.

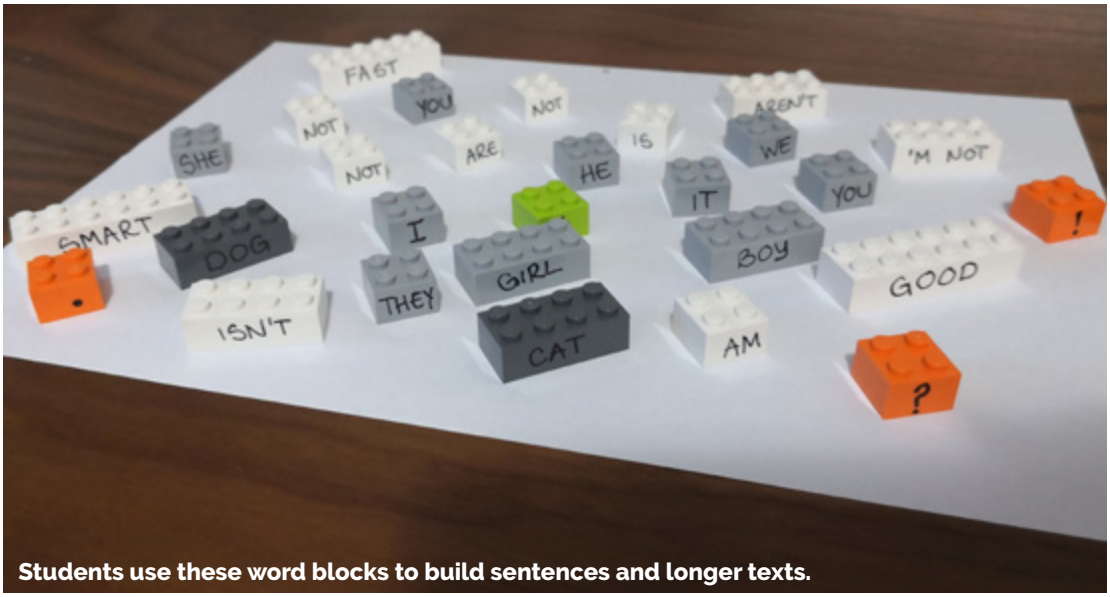
"It was very stressful for parents to get the equipment, to provide stable Internet," she said. The TV lessons helped relieve this pressure, and for the second half of 2020, she emphasized asynchronous learning, since that relied less on the uncertain prospect of all students having solid Internet connections at the same moment. She used Google Classroom and her own blog, which she had created in a stroke of prescient thinking eight months before the pandemic.

Now, in 2021, Bojana is preparing to return to face-to-face instruction at Ivo Andrić, in its leafy suburban Belgrade setting. It is a multistory building with two wings and 1100 students from grades one to eight, all of whom learn English from Bojana or one of her four English-teaching colleagues.

Bojana is glad to be back in the physical classroom. "When it's not face to face, I miss the energy and the interaction," she said, adding that it is difficult for a teacher to get a feel for students' level of interest when talking to a TV camera or even through video cameras online. But in the classroom, "It's a special state of mind." The moment she enters, even if she has a headache, she doesn't feel it at all.

Energy is a word that recurs often when Bojana talks about teaching. With young learners, it is essential to have an active class, to involve

Bojana taught English on national television during the COVID-19 lockdown in 2020.



Students use these word blocks to build sentences and longer texts.

Total Physical Response and Brain Breaks. In fact, the school administrators and the child psychologist who make regular observation visits to classes at Ivo Andrić have a word to describe Bojana's lessons: *rollercoaster*. As she explained, that is "because they are full of energy and everything goes very quickly, so they got the impression you sit on a rollercoaster and you just rush … ."

A typical class includes three stages. Bojana and the students review content from the previous lesson. Next, she introduces new material. Then they practice that in some engaging way. Her classes take a Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) approach, and into them she weaves art, science, Serbian language, and fun. The young learners often work in groups or take on projects, and she especially likes to focus on themes of inclusion and the development of empathy. For example, her grade-four students read the book *The Short-necked Giraffe*, about a giraffe who doesn't fit in, and they followed this with project work, making posters and giving presentations.

Her lessons always have a plan, but flexibility is the key: "You have to adapt. It depends on the mood when you enter the classroom, the energy the children have. It's not the same when you teach the first and last lesson of the day."

Bojana doesn't alter the content of a lesson very often, but she always modifies her approach to suit what's happening in the moment.

Bojana feels at home at Ivo Andrić because, like her, the administrators and her colleagues there are always pushing ahead, seeking to improve. Over the years, the school has participated in many national and international projects. Currently, the school is involved in joint programs with schools in neighboring countries, working together to advance learning for children with disabilities ("Mediation and Inclusion") and to forward digital learning ("Digital Bridges").

Whether teaching online, teaching in the classroom, or taking a hybrid approach, Bojana thinks that the aims and objectives remain the same. Her goal is not just to teach English grammar and vocabulary, but to develop in learners the knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed to face the complex problems of the future. Children should learn English "for life," she said, "not for grades."

Foreign-language learning is well accepted and well integrated into the national educational system. With its position as a crossroads in southern Europe, Serbia has long valued plurilingualism: the idea that citizens benefit from learning additional languages. Many

Bojana's students explore nature as they work on a lesson outdoors at their school.

foreign languages are taught in schools, but English remains the most established, with twice as many learners as all other languages combined (Vučo and Filipović 2013). In fact, English is compulsory from grade one, where students receive two hours of instruction per week. In fifth grade, students select a second foreign language.

Although English is compulsory, Bojana wants students to "fall in love" with the language, "because when you love something, it is much easier to learn it, to have fun, to enjoy, and to gain confidence." When students get truly involved in the subject matter, "they don't have fear of making a mistake, and that's bliss."

Getting students to that stage was more difficult when Bojana taught at secondary school and university, she said. The goal remains the same—"to make them comfortable making mistakes"—but it's not an easy task. Teenagers are afraid to be wrong. This might be a universal trait, she acknowledged, but she has a suspicion that it is especially true for famously proud Serbians.

Luckily for language learners, Serbians are known to be open and direct, something they have in common with Americans. In fact, Bojana noted, "Sometimes they are *really* honest and not so tactful, but with the best intentions." As a language teacher, seeing

"through the prism of language," she offered an example. "In English you might say, 'That's not a very smart idea,' whereas in Serbian, they will just bluntly say, 'It's stupid.'"

Embedded in the Serbian language is a cultural characteristic from which we can surmise the importance of the extended family: "We have separate words for every family member," Bojana said. We can take the word *uncle* as one example. This could be your father's brother (*stric*), your mother's brother (*ujak*), or the spouse of your father's or mother's sister (*teča*).

Each family, too, has a special celebration day, and it is the quintessential Serbian celebration. This is Slava, a tradition that was inscribed in the UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage Lists in 2014 (UNESCO 2014). The majority of Serbians are Orthodox Christians, and for them, this is a day to honor the family's patron saint, their ritual protector and provider of welfare. This means, as far as school goes, some students will be absent on their Slava days, while others will still attend class. The Nikić Vujić family's saint is St. Nicholas, and this Slava occurs on December 19, so Bojana will be sure to arrange for other teachers to cover her lessons, just as she will do for others on *their* Slavas.

Bojana cited her upbringing as a root of her passion for education. Her parents came from "a very modest background" and had to join the workforce at a young age. They did not want this to happen to their daughters—Bojana and her sister. Her parents also understood the value of English study. At one point, in fact, the school near their home did not offer English, so they moved the two girls to a neighboring school. "Even during the nineties," Bojana said, "when the situation was very difficult regarding finances, they always found a way to support us." Later in life, both parents returned to their educations, completing a bachelor's and a master's degree. *That* is lifelong education.

Bojana does not actually have a classroom that she can call her own. Her *My Classroom* is everywhere. Whether she is moving from room to room at Ivo Andrić to teach children of several grades, running a professional-development program for other English teachers, connecting with other schools in Europe for joint projects, or offering lessons on TV, Bojana is continually expanding her horizons and talents.

"I chose to teach," Bojana said, "because I believe in lifelong learning and exploring the world around us, not just the language but everything around us, and that's something I try to encourage among my students."

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This article was written by **Ivana Banković** and **Kevin McCaughey**, who work with the Regional English Language Office at the U.S. Embassy in Belgrade. RELO Belgrade supports English teaching in 13 countries of Central Europe and the Balkans.

Ivana has previously worked as an English language teacher, teacher trainer, and project officer for different educational programs in Serbia. Her areas of interests are project-based learning, teaching English to young learners, using technology in ELT, drama, and storytelling. Ivana has published articles in peer-reviewed journals and presented at numerous international conferences.

Before becoming a Regional English Language Officer, Kevin delivered newspapers, played in rock bands, and taught English in many countries, including as a Department of State English Language Fellow, Fulbright Scholar, and English Language Specialist. Even after 2020, he is not tired of virtual or hybrid learning.

Photos by Bojana Nikić Vujić

Online Breakout Rooms: Jigsaw Discussions and Presentation Practice

by TERENCE McLEAN

LEVEL: Lower Intermediate and above

TIME REQUIRED: Approximately 60 minutes (Time can be determined by the teacher, depending on class size, student level, and student comfort with online platforms.)

GOALS: To practice discussing a specified topic with classmates in online breakout rooms; to collaborate with classmates; to practice summarizing and reporting key details from a group discussion

MATERIALS: An online platform that supports live interaction in breakout rooms (Zoom, Moodle, Blackboard, Skype, etc.); note-taking materials in the students' physical locations (optional)

OVERVIEW: As a result of the switch to virtual and blended learning caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, many language teachers around the world are working to establish welcoming, communicative, online language-learning environments. Most of us have experienced the unwelcome silence associated with trying to get all students involved in an online session. Yes, some students thrive online, but others tend to hesitate, sit back and listen, or tune out completely.

Even though we are teaching online, we can still give students a gentle virtual push—and breakout rooms, if your online platform has this function, are an excellent tool for increasing student talk time during virtual instruction. This activity, a jigsaw that uses breakout rooms, can be used as stand-alone speaking practice or as preparation for a future speaking assignment in which students give an online presentation for the whole class.

Small-group discussions are commonplace in most language-learning classrooms. I often use jigsaw activities in which students become "experts" on a topic in one group, and then they disperse, form new groups, and share what they talked about in the first group to the members of the new group. In the jigsaw-group learning experience, students must collaborate with peers to achieve individual goals.

This cooperative learning activity requires and motivates students to speak. Jigsaw speaking activities also allow students to communicate with many classmates in a low-stress environment, creating an inclusive place for language and social development. Why not extend this opportunity to the online classroom?

PREPARATION:

1. Learn how to make and monitor breakout rooms in your preferred online meeting platform. You will need to know how to create and monitor breakout rooms and

how to reconvene students back into the main meeting room. You may be able to locate platform-specific assistance through your organization's technical support staff or information technology website; there are also free "how to" guides and videos available online for most platforms. The university where I work uses Blackboard Collaborate Ultra; however, teachers can use breakout rooms in Zoom, Moodle, and other online platforms.

Note that teachers can try this introduction to breakout rooms amongst themselves in a class simulation so that they can learn how to manage the rooms; technologically savvy teachers can help others who have difficulty and possibly create a screencast instructional video.

2. In the first few classes of the term, in a large group, I show students how I can separate them into rooms, and then we do basic icebreaker group discussions. Do a few speaking activities in breakout rooms so that students get used to talking with classmates in the breakout format. For example, groups of four can give self-introductions, talk about hobbies, and ask each other informal questions in a friendly interview. Visit each room and make sure that all students are able to function online and that the group is staying on task. I suggest stopping the breakout rooms after 10 or 15 minutes—before conversations begin to lag—and talk together in a large group about how the activity went. This initial experience helps get students ready for more breakout discussions and the rest of this activity.

3. Choose a topic for groups to discuss or a task for them to complete. Here are a few suggestions, although you can come up with your own:

   - Explain how to prepare a dish or meal (e.g., a pizza, a sandwich, chicken curry and rice). Each group chooses a dish and works together to come up with ingredients and instructions for preparing it, to be shared with the new group.
   - Do research on a ceremony or cultural tradition (e.g., a wedding) and prepare a mini-presentation for the new group.
   - Do research on a famous person and prepare a mini-presentation for the new group.
   - Choose a class trip destination and convince others—students in the new group—to agree to the place (a city, country, resort, park, etc.). Each group should have a different destination.

PROCEDURE:

1. Explain to students that they are going to be talking in breakout rooms, but this time there will be two parts to the activity, and they will change groups during the activity. Tell them that they will become "experts" on a topic while discussing it and working with their first group (Part 1). They will then move to a new breakout room and, as an expert representative of their first group, they will share the results of the first discussion with the new group (Part 2). The time for each discussion can depend on the task. I recommend that in Part 1, students should be given 20 to 30 minutes; in Part 2, when students are sharing information, each student should have at least five to seven minutes. However, the time limit for each part is up to the teacher.

2. Explain that *all* students need to take notes as they talk in Part 1 because they will need the notes in Part 2. Emphasize that they will join a different group, in which they will talk about the discussion by the first group in Part 1. In other words, in Part 2, they will be experts who join a new group to share the results of Part 1.

3. Teachers may have their own techniques for making groups, but I prefer letting Blackboard make random groups of four. Or, as monitor, I can create groups, so I can tell the students who will be in their new group and then drag and drop names

into groups of four. (Prepare group lists beforehand to avoid wasting time in class.) I have found that using teacher-made groups takes less time than changing students' status and letting them move around.

4. Once the students understand what they have to do (you can ask questions to verify, or have them repeat the procedure back to you), create the Part 1 breakout rooms with groups of four students; note that you may want to create bigger groups if you have a large class. Give groups the task and the time limit so that they can manage their time, then let them get started.

5. Join each room throughout the process to see how things are going, to make sure that every student has the opportunity to talk, and to monitor time and progress.

6. Five minutes before time is up, visit the rooms again; groups may need more time. Whether to give more time is up to you and may depend on class time constraints. (The activity can be done over a few days, if necessary.)

7. When time is up, end the Part 1 breakout rooms and bring the students back to the main room. Ask if they are ready for Part 2—expert sharing time. Explain that they will now be moved to new breakout rooms to begin Part 2, with a new group. They should introduce themselves to the new group, if necessary, and decide on the order of speaking (this can be done easily with an online lottery site, https://wheelofnames.com/).

8. Begin Part 2: move students to their new breakout rooms and remind them of the time limit. Monitor the new groups in their breakout rooms, observing as students take turns talking about what they had discussed in the original group. Provide assistance as needed.

9. In the new groups, students take turns talking about—or reporting on—what they discussed in the original group. Each student is an expert sharing information and/or providing a summary of the first discussion. Depending on the topic and ability levels, each student should talk for at least five minutes and be willing to answer questions.

   For lower-level classes, the teacher can prepare students before the activity by teaching how to describe a process. A lesson on topic sentences, imperatives, and transitions, along with useful vocabulary, can be great preparation for this activity. Other topics and tasks could require different language preparation.

10. After time is up, or after all students have had a chance to talk, bring everyone back to the main room. As a class, talk about how the activity went. The teacher could ask students specific questions:

    - Did you like talking in the breakout rooms? Did you have any trouble speaking with your classmates or hearing them?
    - Did everybody have a chance to speak?
    - What about the time limits for each part? Did you have enough time? Too much?
    - Did anybody ask you a question about your presentation?
    - Did you use transition words in your presentation?
    - What was difficult to do in your talk?
    - Which presentation piqued your interest the most? Why?
    - How could we make this activity more interactive?
    - What topics would you like to use next time?

Ideally, the students will have developed confidence in speaking in an online group—not

just as a conversation participant, but also as someone with specialized knowledge who gets to explain something to others.

VARIATIONS

There really is no end to the possible variations of this activity—it all depends on the online learning platform, the students, the teacher, the learning objectives, and the time available. Here are a few suggestions:

1. *Pair-based sharing*: Complete this activity in pairs instead of small groups. The first pairs complete a task, and the new mixed pairs share the results of the task.

2. *Follow-up writing*: Ask students to write a paragraph in the online Discussion area. For example, they write about the meal that they planned with their original groups in Part 1, or they can share another recipe. Some of my students have included photos of food they love.

3. *Summarizing and reporting opinions*: Provide each group with a series of questions that they must discuss and take notes on for use in Part 2. Tailor the questions to target areas you want to have the students practice. Here are possible questions:

   Learning English questions:

   - Why do you want to improve your English skills?
   - What do you want to accomplish this year?
   - What is the most difficult aspect of learning English?
   - What is the best part about learning English?
   - What advice would you give to a friend who wants develop fluency in English?

   Personal questions:

   - What is something that you would like others to know about you?
   - What is the best movie that you have ever seen?
   - Do you believe in ghosts? Why or why not?
   - Have you ever … ? (e.g., eaten an insect, seen a ghost, ridden a horse, been on TV)

   Have students answer the questions and discuss responses, take notes, prepare a summary, and get ready to share the information with the new group. This way, they get to talk about the opinions of their classmates as well as their own. This can help their oral-grammar skills development (*I think … / Ali thinks …*).

4. *Preparing for future presentations*: Let the students know that in the future they will be doing a short virtual presentation for the whole class, so this activity allows them to practice talking, without too much pressure, to a smaller group.

FINAL THOUGHTS

My students have told me that they enjoy breakout rooms because they want to talk to their classmates and get more practice before they have to do presentations or interviews, either online or in person. I realized that my usual emphasis on promoting student talk time in my face-to-face classroom had not carried over to my online teaching. I reflected, made adjustments with the help of online breakout rooms, and we all benefited. In closing, I recommend this activity because it helps to create a more inclusive and communicative online classroom, which is essential in supporting our students on their path to language proficiency and academic success.

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Sophie's Seven Tasks

Last week, Sophie completed tasks related to every article in this issue of *Forum*. But in what order? For each clue, decide which of the two tasks she completed first. (The first one has been done for you, as an example.) Then use all the clues to find the order in which she completed all the tasks. Number the tasks from 1 (first) to 7 (last):

Tasks

___ Reading the "My Classroom: Serbia" article
___ Sharing information in a jigsaw breakout room
___ Exchanging cultural information
___ Responding to a description of a room
___ Writing a report about a peacemaker
___ Working at reading stations
___ Participating in a place mat debate

Clues

1. Sophie first saw the Serbia article at one of the reading stations, but she read the article later.
   Which did she complete first? _✓_ reading stations ___ My Classroom article
2. Just before Sophie left the breakout room, one of her friends asked her what she planned to do next. She said, "I'm going to read an article called 'My Classroom: Serbia.' It looks interesting!"
   Which did she complete first? ___ breakout room ___ My Classroom article
3. Reading about Serbia inspired Sophie to select a peacemaker from Europe for her report.
   Which did she complete first? ___ peacemaker report ___ My Classroom article
4. Sophie enjoyed doing the activities at the reading stations so much that she told her friends about them on her way to the culture-studies class.
   Which did she complete first? ___ culture activity ___ reading stations
5. When Sophie got her topic in her breakout room, she told her group members, "This topic is similar to the one I had yesterday for the place mat debate."
   Which did she complete first? ___ place mat debate ___ breakout room
6. Sophie took a break from writing her peacemaker report to submit her room-description assignment, and right after that, she finished her report. Then she was done with her tasks.
   Which did she complete first? ___ room description ___ peacemaker report
7. Sophie had a long walk from the culture-studies class to the class with the place mat debate.
   Which did she complete first? ___ place mat debate ___ culture activity

Answers on page 21

Answers to *The Lighter Side*

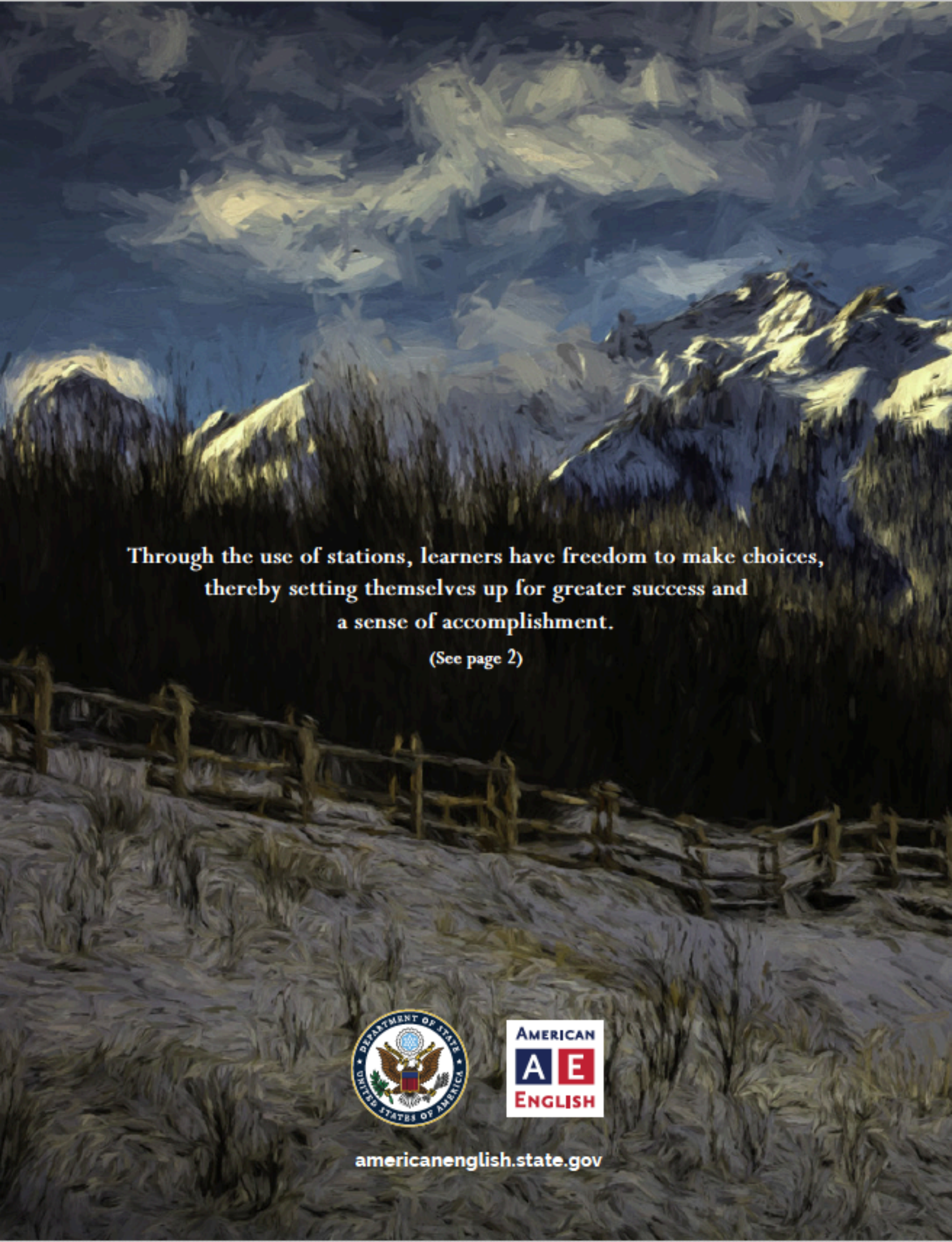
Sophie's Seven Tasks

Tasks

5 Reading the "My Classroom: Serbia" article
4 Sharing information in a jigsaw breakout room
2 Exchanging cultural information
6 Responding to a description of a room
7 Writing a report about a peacemaker
1 Working at reading stations
3 Participating in a place mat debate

Clues

1. Which did she complete first?	✓ reading stations	___ My Classroom article
2. Which did she complete first?	✓ breakout room	___ My Classroom article
3. Which did she complete first?	___ peacemaker report	✓ My Classroom article
4. Which did she complete first?	___ culture activity	✓ reading stations
5. Which did she complete first?	✓ place mat debate	___ breakout room
6. Which did she complete first?	✓ room description	___ peacemaker report
7. Which did she complete first?	___ place mat debate	✓ culture activity



Through the use of stations, learners have freedom to make choices, thereby setting themselves up for greater success and a sense of accomplishment.

(See page 2)

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